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CHILE: Constitutional Plebiscite

President Pinochet is likely to win today's plebiscite on a new constitution, but the political costs could outweigh the benefits to his military regime. [redacted]

The election probably will be fair--there was no known fraud in a referendum in 1978. An overwhelmingly favorable vote would lend an aura of legitimacy to the regime for the first time in its seven-year history. The constitution confirms direct military rule until 1989 and gives Pinochet the option of running for an eight-year civilian term at that time. [redacted]

A convincing vote also would make it easier for Pinochet to ignore foreign critics, including the countries in the Organization of American States that considered sponsoring a resolution protesting the plebiscite. In addition, domestic opposition leaders who have urged a "no" vote would appear discredited. [redacted]

The referendum, however, also entails serious risks. Some of the regime's supporters believe that if a 60-percent "yes" vote is not obtained, the military would be embarrassed and could demand changes in government policies and personnel. [redacted]

The newly aroused opposition is trying to use the plebiscite to rally popular discontent. Church-state relations--already strained by recent government repression in response to an upsurge in terrorism--have worsened. Chilean bishops have publicly complained that the plebiscite offers no reasonable alternative to continued military rule if the constitution is rejected. [redacted]

Even if he wins by a wide margin, Pinochet may eventually regret providing the opposition such a clear target. Unless he takes steps in the next few months to mollify moderate critics while isolating more radical opponents, the plebiscite could prove a hollow victory. Pinochet's past harsh treatment of his detractors, however, raises doubts about his ability to neutralize the opposition. [redacted]